

INFORMATION

Real Estate
 NEWS

COLUMNS

+ Real Estate Briefs
 + Deal of the Week
 + Leasing Notes
 + On The Move

DATABASES

+ Home Sales
 + Commercial Real Estate
 + Leasing Notes
 + Notices Of Default
 + Trustee Sales

TOOLS AND RESOURCES

+ Mortgage Calculator
 + Source Sales Tools

News

Construction

Defense

Economy

Education

Finance

Government

Health

Hospitality

Law

Technology

Commentary

RESOURCES

Attorney Directory
 Awards & Programs
 Business Directory
 Digital Edition
 Media Center
 Newsmakers
 Online Plan Room
 Roundtables
 Soaring Dimensions
 SourceBook
 Special Reports
 Water

RESEARCH

Classifieds
 Public Notices
 Source Sales Tools

COMMUNITY

Arts and Entertainment
 Communities
 Events
 Landmarks
 Movies
 Restaurants
 Traffic
 Weather

CORPORATE

Advertising
 Company Info
 Contact Us
 FAQ
 Feedback
 Site Index

NEWS | SAN DIEGO | REAL ESTATE

CDC founder says coaching kids molded his business acumen

By **DAVID L. CODDON**, Special to the Daily Transcript
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If you're searching for Mr. Positivity, look no further than Don Zech, founder of **CDC Commercial Inc.**

Zech, who started in the commercial properties business at John Burnham & Company before launching CDC in 1996, doesn't hesitate when he says, "This is the best time in the 27 years I have seen to lease or buy commercial property in San Diego."

Zech has reason for optimism. His Interstate-15-corridor, retail-oriented business did \$16.5 million in leases and sales last year, and is more than \$12.5 million so far in 2013.

He also cites factors such as low prices and interest rates and a general willingness to negotiate for fueling his confidence.

San Diego's climate – and that's not just a reference to the weather – plays into the equation, as well.

"San Diego is a captive market," said Zech, who grew up in Escondido and graduated from the University of San Diego. "We are limited by the ocean, Mexico, Camp Pendleton and the desert. We have great weather year round and that all attracts the best, the brightest and the richest to live and work here."

Though Zech called his client niche "high-net-worth individuals," he has worked with "mom and pop" businesses, too.



CDC Commercial specializes in Interstate-15 corridor properties, such as this 12,759-square-foot Class B office condominium on 350 W. Fifth Ave. in Escondido. CDC Commercial serves as the primary leasing company. Photo courtesy of CoStar

All, he said, get personal service.

"We're an opportunity broker and a relationship firm," he added.

On the subject of relationships, Zech is a devoted family man who during the trying economic downturn of a few years ago, brought his son Nick into the business.

(Another CDC broker, Matt Orth, brought his son, Pete, to the company a year later.)

"It was a very gutsy call," Zech said of hiring young Nick. "It was a tough time to come into the business, but a great time to learn that business."

Then, as today, Zech was optimistic. "I had to anticipate that the economy would get better. It wasn't whether we were going to come back, but when."

Zech, and in turn CDC, shuns the corporate culture. Besides not having a taste for bureaucratic overload and spreadsheets, Zech wanted to have time to coach his kids when he started the company.

Coaching not only his own but other kids in five different sports has molded his business acumen.

"Coaching taught me a bit more about nuance, about strategy," he said. "It really hones your value system, which translates immediately to what you're doing in sales. I had the [fundamental] tools, but when I taught them, I became far stronger as a broker."

Looking toward the retail properties horizon, Zech acknowledged the challenges such businesses face, the "structural problem."

"What we're facing is a hole in the bucket," he said. "We've changed the way we shop."

Brick-and-mortar retailers competing with online counterparts "have to sell something that people will touch," Zech added.

He advocates an integration of both selling strategies, omni-channel retailing that makes use of brick-and-mortar but also multiple-platform media: "You have to adapt."

You also have to work hard, a tenet Zech has no doubt taught over the years. "One thing is certain, and that is that buyers and lessees today will eventually look back at big profits, and when they do, people will say, 'Boy, weren't you lucky!'"

"But we [at CDC Commercial, Inc.] know that you have to work hard to get lucky."

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